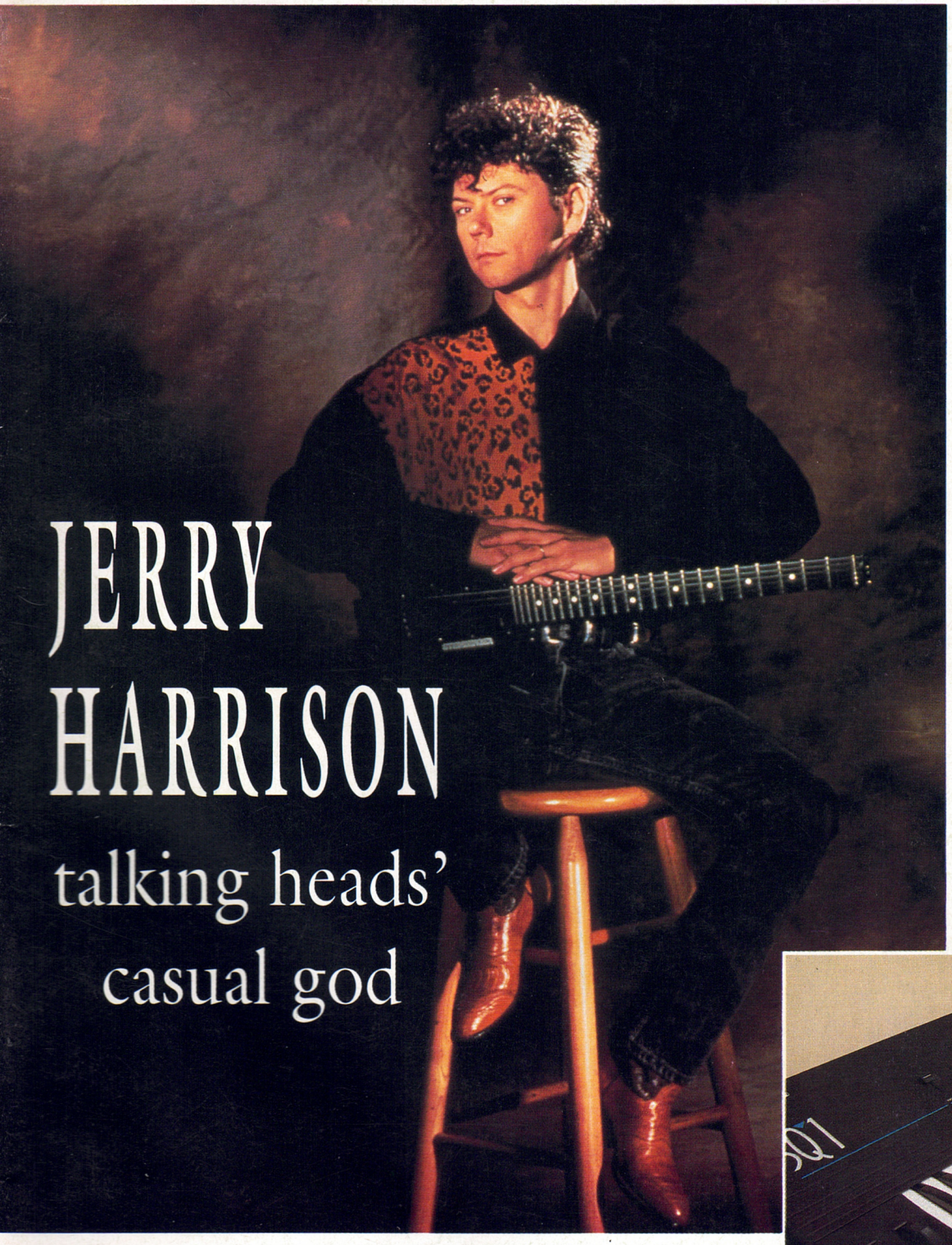
Established 1981

Music Technology

THE WORLD'S PREMIER HI-TECH MUSIC MAGAZINE

October 1990
£1.60

9 770957 660015 10



JERRY HARRISON

talking heads' casual god

ON TEST

Q-Logic
MIDI Metro

JBL
SB1 Sub-Bass Unit

Roland
CF10 Digital Fader

JBL
Control 1 Plus
Monitors

Roland
CN20 Musical Entry Pad

WIN

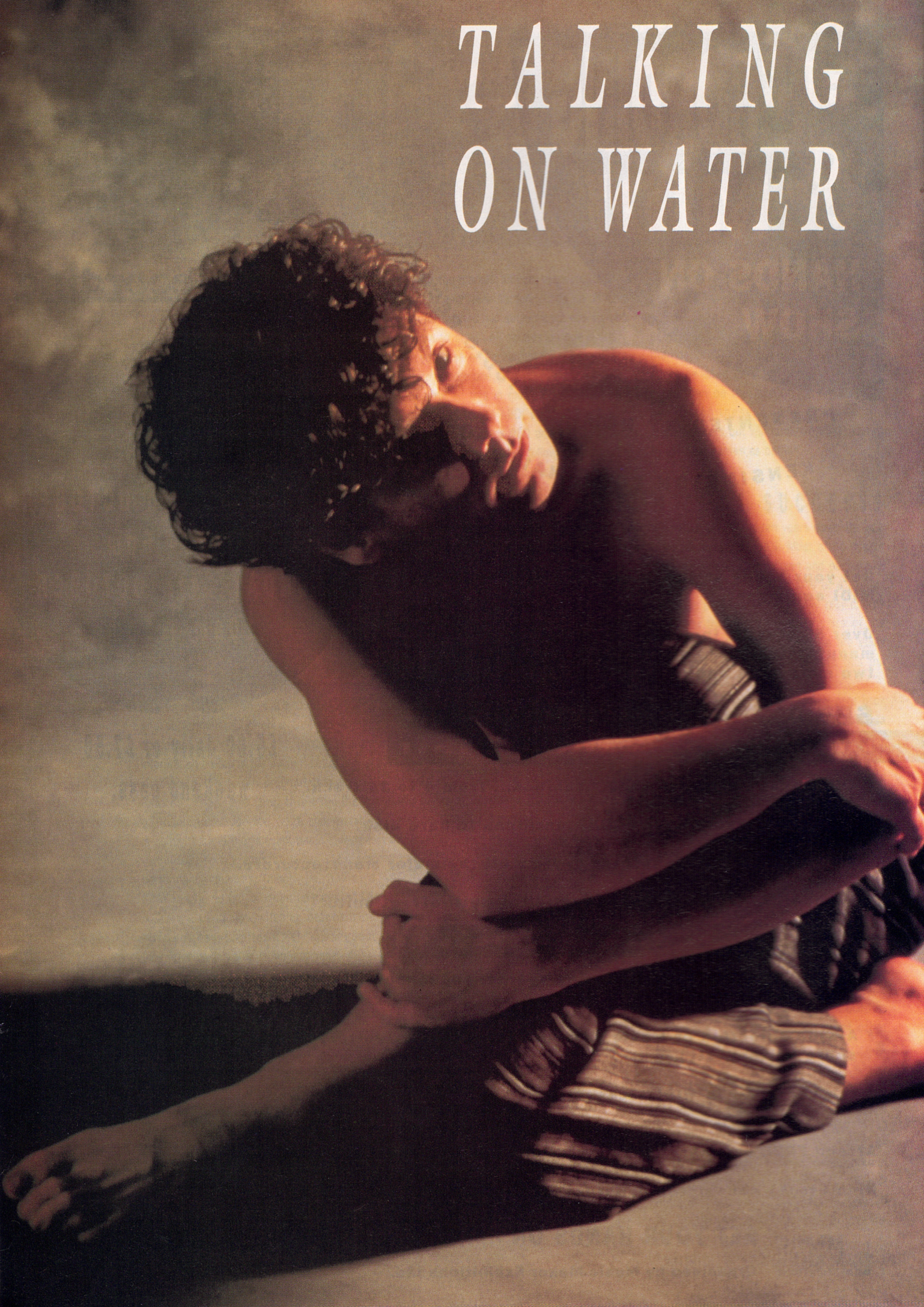
VZ sounds & software

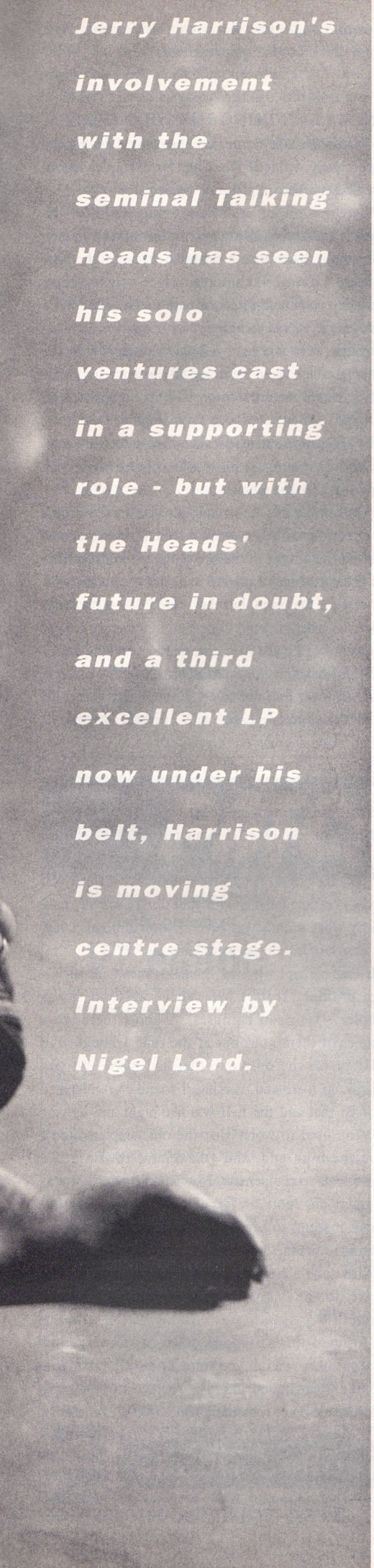
SEQUENTIAL CIRCUITS PRO-ONE

classic analogue technology

ENSONIQ SQ1

personal music studio


TALKING
ON WATER



Jerry Harrison's involvement with the seminal Talking Heads has seen his solo ventures cast in a supporting role - but with the Heads' future in doubt, and a third excellent LP now under his belt, Harrison is moving centre stage. Interview by Nigel Lord.

PROBABLY THE BEST THING ABOUT being a former member of The Modern Lovers is that it keeps you forever young in the public imagination. Jerry Harrison is currently a former Modern Lover, and the way things are going, he seems likely to become a former Talking Head - along with the other members of the band: David Byrne, Tina Weymouth and Chris Franz. But that's something we'll (almost) come to later. Right now I'm confronted with a confident, good-looking, Harvard graduate whose charm and enthusiasm bely his 20-odd years in the music business.

Harrison would be the first to admit that those years have been pretty kind to him. From the cult following of The Modern Lovers and the early Talking Heads, he has enjoyed mainstream success as the band's popularity mushroomed to international proportions. Latterly his solo career has come off the starting blocks and taken on its own momentum with the release of his first two albums, *The Red and the Black* and *Casual Gods*. In the intervening periods, he has developed a parallel career as a producer, chalking up credits with artistes as diverse as Fine Young Cannibals, Violent Femmes and the BoDeans, recorded an anti-Reagan rap song with Bootsie Collins and found time for a spot of album sleeve design - for one of which, Talking Heads' *Fear of Music*, he was awarded a Grammy.

Like I said, the years have been kind to Harrison, but behind the successes one senses a very perceptive mind and a man who has come to realise he can rely on his own sense of proportion and good timing. His career, along with that of the other Talking Heads and many of their late '70s contempories, has been underpinned by the more temperate, understated approach of America's East Coast. A band like Talking Heads could never have been a product of Los Angeles.

Throughout his career, Harrison's willingness to embrace new advances in technology has drawn him into a much closer working relationship with keyboard and sampling equipment and this has provided much of the instrumentation for the latest album, *Walk On Water*. A many-faceted album, it parallels much of Talking Heads' careful melding of diverse international influences and sharply-honed pop sensibilities, and reflects a new-found confidence in Harrison's own ability.

Surely, as a member of a band with such an impressive track record, he must still feel himself to be labouring under the weight of their reputation?

"I actually feel that the more of these records I make - and there is an element of continuity with these albums - the more the identity of Casual Gods and my identity outside Talking Heads is growing", Harrison counters.

But is he not experiencing any of the usual antipathy reserved for artistes working outside the band with which they have always been associated? "That's one of the reasons I wanted to have some kind of collaboration with people that had been in Talking Heads when we were on tour - people like Bernie Worrell, Alex Weir and Chris Spedding, all of whom are great musicians."

Clearly, Harrison is very aware of the way his solo work is likely to be perceived, but with the other two Talking Heads factions still immersed in their respective projects, how does he respond to the criticism that where successful bands are concerned, the sum of the parts seldom equals the whole?

"I think it's largely a matter of consistency", comes the measured reply. "Taking the Beatles as the obvious example, I think it has to do with how consistent their work was outside the band. In general the solo projects were never as consistent as the Beatles were as a band. *But*, a song like 'Imagine' by John Lennon was as good as anything the Beatles ever did together."

One possible solution could be to avoid those areas where his music might be identified too closely with that of Talking Heads. Any suggestion that this has been a deliberate approach are quickly quashed.

"Unlike the Tom Tom Club and David, who have very deliberately tried to do something different outside the band, I just try to write good songs. If they sound like something Talking Heads would do then it's just too bad. I don't care if it's similar and dissimilar, just as long as it's good."

Of course, this sort of conversation presupposes the continued existence of Talking Heads - a state of affairs which at the present time seems anything but certain. You might expect Harrison to be in as good a position as anyone to fill us in on the current status of the band, but this is apparently not the case. So accustomed is he to answering questions on this very subject, he has armed himself with a handful of skilful, if rather terse rejoinders.

Does the band still exist? "We're on vacation." It's been one hell of a vacation. . .are you ever likely to return? "Ask David". Chance would be a fine thing. It seems that some bands are always at the mercy of their more capricious members, would he agree? "It only takes one to say no." True. But if it's always the same one - "ask David".

ON THE SUBJECT OF NAMES, IT SEEMS that the title of the last album, *Casual Gods,* has been adopted by Harrison's current touring band. Anyone familiar with the album will remember that it was this name, together with the sleeve photography, which combined to form such an extraordinarily powerful image. The photographs were taken in a vast open cast gold mine in Brazil where countless hundreds of ragged mine workers carry huge sacks up an almost vertical slope in an effort to find gold. As the sleeve notes point out: "These are not scenes from a movie. Though they look like swarming ants or endless caravans of pack animals, they are men reduced to this condition by poverty and the bewildering indifference of casual gods". It's an image you don't easily forget. . .

"I kind of like making my album covers ➤

➤ arresting: beautiful pictures that have a slightly disturbing message - rather than using them to reflect some kind of vanity on my part."

What about the inevitable criticisms of exploitation? You may be using an album cover to draw attention to the plight of a group of workers in Brazil, but is this not ultimately exploitative in some way?

"I take the point, but I don't think my using those photographs is going to affect those people in any way at all. I also think that as unfortunate as they are, there is something inspiring about those pictures. I think it highlights just how far people will go to get ahead."

"My writing technique was helped by the advent of multitrack cassette recorders and drum machines - I used to write out chords for the piano, but they were never really songs to me."

Or perhaps how far they'll go to stay alive. . . Images aside, *Casual Gods* and its predecessor *The Red and the Black* went a long way towards making the world aware that the success of Talking Heads had rested much more on Harrison's shoulders than had previously been believed. And with the new album set to consolidate this reappraisal of his skill as a writer, musician and producer, it seems that Harrison's time as a solo artist might well have come. But how much of this self-affirmation, I wondered, had been prompted by living in Byrne's shadow?

"I think that anyone who was around when Talking Heads started as a trio was very aware of what I did when I joined", he replies. "Of course, when Eno became involved, because he was also associated with keyboards, it became that much more difficult to say what he did and what I did. But he was much better known than me, so I think there was a tendency to give him more credit and me less. And then when we became an enlarged band it was even more difficult to figure out who did what. So looking back, I think it was easy for people not to have a very clear idea about what any of us did - apart from David who was the singer.

"But really, I didn't make the albums as an attempt to prove something. I made them because I wanted to make them. At one point in Talking Heads' career we decided that the only healthy way of dealing with our different aspirations was to break up our lives into times we worked together and times we worked apart. From my point of view, the real challenge was in becoming a lead singer, because I had never done that in a band before. For me, it was a little bit like keeping yourself alive; doing something that you haven't done before. It's like going back to an earlier part of your life and starting again. I think a lot of people are afraid to do those things; if you're successful it can be really difficult to put your reputation on the line. But it was that element of risk taking which I found quite exciting."

SINCE LAUNCHING HIS SOLO CAREER, has Harrison's role as an instrumentalist become any more clearly defined? Does he, for example, regard himself as a keyboard player or a guitarist?

"I've been playing a lot more keyboards lately", he reveals, "and keyboards are my first instrument. In fact, I originally had quite a problem because the first keyboard I owned was an organ which only had three octaves so you couldn't play it with two hands! After a while, my left-hand technique just began to fall apart. Of course, now you have full-size keyboards with the right feel which allow me to use all the dexterity I once had. It makes me want to go back to my early piano training."

So which instrument does he choose to write on - presumably it is easier for a solo artist to work with keyboards than the guitar?

"Yes, but it varies. Sometimes it's one, sometimes it's the other. Actually, my writing technique was helped most by the advent of multitracking cassette recorders and drum machines. I used to write out chords and stuff like that for the piano, but they were never really songs to me. I needed to build some kind of structure around a beat. In fact I had a hard time writing anything until I could put something like a small band together on tape. That was really freeing for me. Up until that point, I'd found myself getting bored with it; it was like, there's just not enough going on there."

After over a decade of mainstream success, what equipment could a man who started with a three-octave organ currently aspire to?

"I use the Emulator III as my major instrument and there's also some D50s, DX7s and DX7IIs - I still like the DXs for bright, percussive sounds. But I think you need to become familiar with your library so you know exactly what sounds you have at your disposal. I just get so sick of learning new instruments."

Is that perhaps why the Emulator maintains such a high profile? "Yeah. I love having a 16-bit stereo sampler", Harrison enthuses. "I know there are a number of them now, but at the time I bought the E-III it was the only one that had SCSI and was actually up there and working. I found the difference between that and the E-II was like night and day for me. You used to worry that the old samplers didn't have the high end, and you'd have to use other instruments to compensate. Now samplers don't sound so grainy any more, in fact the E-III has a beautiful sound. It seems to have some problems with its stereo imaging sometimes but it's a great machine."

With such a heavy emphasis on sampled voices, where do the "conventional" synths fit into the picture?

"Again, I think it comes down to knowing your library so that you can go through on each instrument and find what you looking for - whether it's something you've made up or something you've found. But then a lot of times, after I've decided on a particular voice I try to mess it up by putting it into a combination with other sounds. One of the things I am very aware of is

how you can sometimes be listening to a record and think 'oh, there's the shakuhachi from the E-II, and that's that horn sample from the Akai. . .'."

Most of us have experienced this, or something like it, at some time or other. But how far, I wondered, would Harrison go out of his way to avoid the situation?

"Pretty far", comes the reply. "As I say, a lot of times I'll deliberately try to mess it up."

Can we assume from this that he would not consider using other people's records as a source in his sampling activities?

"Well, I did use Ronald Reagan's voice. . . Really, it isn't something I'm interested in doing. I suppose it depends on how much you take. If it's just something like a snare drum that's one thing, but if it's a whole phrase I think that's quite different. As far as I'm concerned though, other people can do anything they want - if they want to take the whole thing that's fine. Maybe they should have to pay some publishing or songwriting royalties. I know that Loleatta Holloway got paid for the Black Box record, but there they built practically the whole of the record around her voice. I think that's a perfect example of a situation where they really stretched the rule. On the other hand, it was a good song. . ."

HARRISON'S NAME HAS, FOR SOME YEARS now, been associated with the mid-west town of Milwaukee. Does he have some kind of studio set up there?

"Not an actual studio, but I have equipment there which at this point is like a virtual studio. I have a Macintosh II computer which is currently running Performer software. And I've tried a number of different sync boxes like the Jambox and one by Opcode called the Studio 3. Also, I've just been trying this thing called the MIDI Timepiece by Mark Of The Unicorn: I seem to have a lot of problems with sync, keeping things totally in time.

"I'm also using the direct-to-disk system by Digidesign, Soundtools, which is great. I believe they're also putting it together with video soon. They're going to have this thing called Sound Vision which will be a combination sequencer and a live two-track or four-track system. I can see myself changing to that when it comes along."

So where exactly is all this equipment used?

"I helped get this studio together in Milwaukee which has now been discovered by a lot of new age people. There's a label called Narada out there and they kind of book it round the clock. So I ended up at a new studio called AD Productions in Milwaukee which overlooks Lake Michigan. It has a beautiful Neve V-series desk and a Mitsubishi multitrack machine and they offered me this incredible studio deal, so I couldn't really refuse. But I actually worked in 11 different studios on this album, in Milwaukee, Lake Geneva Wisconsin, New York, Connecticut, London and Paris."

Not a West Coast location amongst them - does this reflect a continuing disenchantment with Los Angeles and its attendant culture by an artist who has long been associated with the East Coast? ➤

PATCHWORKS

Exclusive limited offer for the first 50 customers

VZ editor

(covering this Casio range) + "Free" voices

For the special price of £49.95

(normal RRP - £79.85)

Voices

Software

Synths

Secondhand Goodie Box

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS EXCLUSIVE OFFER

Buy any of the software, hardware or synths mentioned in this advert and get some of "Our Very Own Original" synth voices

Absolutely Free

Visitors are always welcome for demonstrations and sales of equipment/software (with no obligation to buy) but strictly by appointment only

CREDIT CARD HOTLINE - 10 TILL 10 - 7 DAYS - 0424 436674

Mail order; make cheques/POs payable to "Patchworks" Frederick House, 211 Frederick Road, Hastings, East Sussex TN35 5AU

➤ "I don't know. I just feel more comfortable in New York than I do in Los Angeles. I think there's kind of an edge to New York - a kind of urban sensibility - and I find myself more at home with that.

"Recently, with a lot of the rap groups which have come out of LA, I think it's started to move away from that country rock and jazz rock image that it was often associated with."

While this is born out by such outfits as the Boo Yaa Tribe, LA still has a long way to go before it throws off completely its association with the more cliched excesses of the rock 'n' roll industry in which it plays such an important part.

On the subject of new music, does Harrison identify with any of the dance styles currently in vogue; what about the rap groups he's already mentioned?

"I see it as being a little bit apart from what I'm doing, but I still think it's interesting. They seem to have retained a lot of their vitality by changing up: just when you thought that it would burn itself out, they found ways of keeping it vital. I think it succeeds in being incredibly direct - everything is stripped down to lyrics and beat. I see it as being the converse of new age music which actually comprises no lyrics and very little beat. But as far as dance is concerned, I'd say I preferred something like Funkadelic and more funky music, which often has a slightly slower beat. That's why I love playing with Bernie - he and I are kind of like brothers, we have a great time playing together."

"I think people who claim to be totally artistic have simply found a way to make what they're doing commercial - in a sense we're all doing it, so it's not a pure art form."

Despite the kind of melodic and instrumental experimentation which characterised much of the first two albums and also *Walk On Water*, Harrison, like many American musicians, still has a tendency to fall back on a good ol' rock 'n' roll toon when the pace needs hotting up. (The same thing was true of Robbie Robertson's eponymous solo album from a couple of years ago.) Does this reflect the continuing love affair Americans seem to have with what I suppose must be their most successful export?

"I think so", Harrison confirms. "I certainly still like rock 'n' roll. It gave me great pleasure, for example, to have written a track like 'Sleep Angel', which in many ways is a very traditional song. I liked the idea of having written a song that succeeded within a traditional framework. It didn't succeed by being experimental, it was almost like you could have written it on sheet music and heard someone play it and say 'yeah, that's a nice song'."

Well maybe, but as far as I'm concerned it's tracks like 'The Doctor Lie' and 'Bobby' from *Casual Gods* which provide the real high points. Both of them, incidentally, are songs which exploit the idea of marrying Western melodic form with African rhythm. This in itself is quite a novel concept as crossover styles usually work in the other direction - that is with Western rhythmic form being coupled to Eastern melodies. This, of course, is a tradition which goes back to the Byrne/Eno collaboration, *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts*, and probably stems from the desire to ensure a track is kept usable within a dance context.

But for Harrison, this isn't the only effort he's made to avoid the more obvious cliches of crossover projects.

"It's funny", he says, "people often ask me about playing world music, but for me it tends to work the other way round. Rather than going to Africa and trying to adapt my music to what I hear over there, I had people from Africa actually in the band. For example, there were some French African muscians I'd met when we were making *Naked* and on tracks like 'Kick Start' (Harrison's last solo single) which has a very aggressive guitar sound and a great thunderous rolling bassline, they played these really abstract hi-hats which gave the song a nice sense of syncopation against the more consistent instruments."

This kind of experimentation would seem to point to him having rather more space to breathe than David Byrne, who - because of the public perception of him as prime mover behind Talking Heads - is under considerable pressure to at least equal his work within the band.

"No", contradicts the keyboard player, "I think David has quite an advantage in that he can do something that is deliberately non-commercial and because he is identified with the success of Talking Heads it confirms people's belief in what a great artist he is. On the other hand, my records have to have some sort of link to the commercial market or I wouldn't be given the opportunity of making them, and in that sense I think I'm more constrained. But I believe pop music is largely about walking this cusp between commerciality and art. And it's always been about that. I think people that claim to be totally artistic have simply found a way to make what they're doing commercial. In a sense we're all doing it, so it's not a pure art form."

Our allotted interview time almost up, a couple of important questions still have to be answered. First "Are there any good pop songs left to be written?". Harrison's confidence is reassuring - so who's going to write them?

"I am. In fact a lot of them are on this new album."

Second question: will we, perhaps, get the chance to hear them live?

"Well, there are no plans to play any dates in this country at the present time, but I'm on my way back to the States to do rehearsals for a tour with Chris and Tina. We're going to do half Tom Tom Club material and half mine. Actually we're going out with the Ramones and Debbie Harry - we're calling it *The Escape From New York Tour*".

Sounds rather like *The Escape From 1978 Tour* to me - all it needs is Tom Verlaine and Patti Smith. And have the three Heads without Byrne thought of a name for themselves?

"We were thinking of calling ourselves Shrunken Heads", Harrison reveals, "but we decided against it." ■